

Capitalism and the environment

Interview with James Speth in NPR Worldview's series "Critical Thinking on Capitalism," March 26, 2008

Andony Melathopoulos

A PARADOX CONFRONTS American environmentalists, according to James Gustave Speth, the Dean of Yale's School of Forestry and Environmental Studies: "We now have a flourishing environmental movement, a proliferating number of organisations, more and more money going into this, decades now of environmental legislation and programs, at all levels of government, and the environment keeps going downhill."

The contradiction, according to Speth, results from the U.S. environmental movement focusing too narrowly on working "within the system." They lobby, litigate and educate the public to the neglect of an "equally powerful effort to change the system itself." "We haven't challenged corporate power and the domination of wealth in our political process, we haven't... challenged the deep subsidisation of environmental destruction... we haven't challenged growth itself, we certainly haven't challenged our own hyperventilating lifestyles."

The environmental movement, he continues, must move beyond the victories of the 1970s that led to technocratic environmental regulation. It needs to go from being "basically... an inside the Beltway business" towards an "environmental movement that is far more committed to building grassroots political power. We need a real movement and we need to get real political about it."

A major task of this grassroots political movement is to exert the pressure necessary to transform capitalism towards an ecologically sustainable end. Capitalism, according to Speth, presently cannot reproduce itself without concurrently increasing the level of economic activity. This activity, he maintains, can be "less or more environmentally destructive," but ultimately undermines sustainable development. "This is the core of the problem. We have a system that is very successful at creating economic growth and this economic growth is inherently destructive and is overwhelming our efforts at environmental clean-up and environmental management."

The crushing current of capitalist production, however, is one that Speth suggests can be mitigated. Prices can be adjusted to be "environmentally honest" through market-oriented instruments such as emission cap and trade permits. Growth can be tempered by shifting the focus away from traditional statistics that exclusively measure growth, such as Gross Domestic Product, towards ones that measure progress towards sustainability, such as the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare. Finally, the legal structure of large trans-national firms can be recast to make them responsive to environmental and social imperatives. "The corporations should be governed with

the participation of all of the stakeholders in the corporation and not just the people elected by... the shareholders... this would change the dynamics of the corporations fundamentally. It would make the corporation a lot more open to protecting local communities where they live and work, it would make them a lot more responsible and responsive to environmental concerns... it would not be a constant war to maximize profits." He even briefly situates his programme within an earlier revolutionary tradition: "We must dramatically change the publicly traded, limited liability global corporation just as previous generations set out to eliminate or control the monarchy".

Ironically it was the Nineteenth Century European revolutions to "eliminate or control the monarchy" that primarily *enabled* the age of industrial capitalism. These capitalist social relations were far more productive and dynamic than the feudal relations that were overthrown. This dynamism and productivity, however, is interwoven with contradictions. The current environmental crisis highlights this contradictory character. Capitalism is not only generative of the blind runaway development that causes the damage, but also of a science which can quantify the damage and model scenarios for its mitigation, cultural currents that redefine value-values to include environmental parameters and even price mechanisms that warn capitalists of ecological constraints on productivity. Ultimately, our ability to both cause and recognise the problem is a product of capital.

Dr Speth's renewed call to "eliminate or control the monarchy" arises from a growing gap between "how things are" (worsening environmental conditions) and "how things ought to be" (awareness of the possibility of solutions). This gap not only results in crisis, it also provides the revolutionary germ for transcending capitalism and, as such, the possibility of directly dealing with environmental problems. Crises, however, have been historically averted not by revolution, but by policies of reform. The ultimate goal of these reformisms is not the over-coming of capitalism, but rather, to make the necessary changes for it to persist. Unwittingly, by not confronting the fundamental logic of capitalism, reformism provides the basis for renewed contradictions and crisis.

Dr. Speth's programme, in this sense, is not revolutionary, but reformist. Instead of fundamentally trying to reshape society in an ecologically sustainable way, as he frames his goal at the beginning of the interview, he brackets this transformation within the confines of capitalist production. Like the reformers of the past, he searches for the steps necessary to renew capitalist ac-

cumulation in the face of this latest looming crisis.

There are already a number of mechanisms to reward profitability in the face of environmental degradation. Speth provides an example of such a mechanism in his interview. Previous to the 1970s acid emissions grew in-step with economic activity in industrialised countries. Using a combination of stringent regulations (1970s) and a sulphur dioxide cap and trade emission trading system (1990s) the ratio of sulphur dioxide/GDP fell among U.S. firms by an average rate of 9% per year (1970–2000). The environmental crisis of acid rain, consequently, had the effect of encouraging capitalists to adapt and determine new ways of accumulating capital. These new ways increased profitability in spite of mitigation costs. The reproduction of capitalism in this non-polluting form, consequently, acted to restore profitability.

Harriett Friedmann points out "Just as a 'coalition of enlightened capitalists, middle-class reformers and militant labor movements brought us not socialism but welfare capitalism' so the coalition of environmental, consumer and fair-trade movements promised not a reorganization of society around the central value of enhancing ecosystem integrity, but green capitalism." Speth's reformed capitalism is still capitalism and, as such, it is subjected to the contradictions inherent in all historic forms of capitalism. These contradictions invariably sew the seeds for new and varied crises. A good illustration of the self-perpetuating nature of reformism, and one that is of pressing relevance to the environmental movement, is the string of crises that have plagued agricultural production from the outset of industrial capitalism[1].

The rapid urbanisation of Britain during the Industrial Revolution resulted in a disastrous rise in food prices. Instead of confronting capitalist production directly, British liberals resolved the crisis indirectly by eliminating agricultural tariffs. The European Diaspora in the Americas and Oceania responded to the opened market and increased their production of food. European capital tied these distant agricultural areas together in a network of railways and shipping fleets. By 1873 this network caused regional wheat prices to converge into a world market. This market expanded considerably and by 1929 its production had increased almost six-fold.

1 I am indebted to Harriet Friedmann's essay "From Colonialism to Green capitalism: Social movements and emergence of food regimes", *New Directions in the Sociology of Global Development* (eds. Buttel, F. and McMichael, PJ. [2005] Oxford: Elsevier.

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While the reforms of the first food crisis achieved the goal of reducing food costs in the urban industrialised core, it also created the basis for a renewed crisis. This new crisis had a different appearance. Perhaps the most devastating manifestation was the sudden drop in prices that resulted from overproduction coupled with intense international competition. Between 1925 and 1935 prices dropped steeply by two thirds and this undermined the profitability of most farmers.

The more well-known symbol of this crisis, however, was the ecological catastrophe of the "Dust Bowl". Unlike the scientific focus on long-term soil fertility of the earlier English High Farming, the new era of Diasporic-Colonial farmers ploughed perennial grasslands down without an understanding of how to prevent chronic soil erosion. Within two generations, consequently, North American farms turned their highly productive soil into a wasteland.

The farm crisis of 1925–1935 was addressed in the U.S. by the New Deal reforms that supported beleaguered farmers through government purchases of surplus commodities. This form was replicated after the war by other advanced capitalist countries. Although this policy stabilised farm incomes it had the unintended consequence of subsidising the overproduction of food in advanced capitalist countries, which in turn, depressed production in developing countries. Furthermore, productivity was restored not by returning to High English Farming practices, but by a value maximizing assemblage of industrially-produced inputs, including machinery, agro-chemicals and genetically-improved seeds.

The continued failure to deal with the commodity nature of agricultural production resulted in a renewed food crisis in 1974, in the midst of a period of immense global economic turbulence. Falling profitability of U.S. manufacturers coupled with escalating national balance of payment deficits forced the U.S. to deal with its accumulated food surplus. A massive Soviet-American grain deal in 1972 and 1973 provided the U.S. an opportunity to sell off its massive surplus for needed hard currency. Consequently the reliably abundant U.S. food surplus was suddenly unavailable to developing countries and prices for grains and oilseeds tripled. Furthermore, the crisis precipitated the abandonment of the post-war Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates, which essentially enabled the freer movement of international capital, and consequently, the expansion of trans-national corporations. Corporate dominance, therefore, has more to do with the failure of an earlier reformist policy to deal with

Frankfurt School, continued from page 2



The participants of the "Marxist Workweek" in Geraberg bei Arnstadt, Thuringia, 1923. Among them are a few people in the milieu of the Institute for Social Research: Friedrich Pollock (top row, second from the left), Georg Lukács (top row, fourth from the left), Felix Weil (top row, second from the right), Karl August Wittfogel (bottom row, first from the left), Rose Wittfogel (bottom row, second from the left), Christiane Sorge (bottom row, fourth from the left), Karl Korsch (bottom row, fifth from the left).

scope were one of a kind. Weil and Grünberg had created an institution that saw its present academic role as only a preparation for its real role: the center for the social sciences in a post-revolutionary Germany.

But the revolution never came. In fact, the political situation was taking a sharp turn to the Right. From 1926 on, it became a common practice of hostile conservative forces within the university and the government to dig up the communist past of Institute affiliates, such as Weil and Grossman, as a way to rile up dissent against them. This was made easier when in 1930, the Weimar administration, in its last struggle to maintain stability in a country that had become politically polarized into Communist and Nazi camps, made it illegal for people on the governments payroll to belong to either of these parties. Finally, in the same year's election the Nazi party won a majority in parliament.

Left wing students of the Frankfurt University, including some graduate students affiliated with the Institute, had to organize security contingents after Nazi youth began demonstrating at the university gates. Such defensive tactics could offer only temporary protection. The election of Hitler as chancellor was only two years away.

In 1930, two years after a stroke left Grünberg unable to continue his work at the helm of the Institute, Horkheimer replaced him as director. He shared none of his predecessors' "scientific" optimism. In view of the threat that the rising tide of Nazism presented to an academic institution run by Jewish Marxists, Horkheimer transferred the Institute's finances to Switzerland and set the stage for flight. Horkheimer's inaugural speech was very different from the one Grünberg gave only seven years before. He spoke, not of an unstoppable march towards socialism, but instead referred to the necessity for a backward glance, an accounting for the failure of the emancipation that had

only a few years ago seemed just around the corner. He did this by proposing a look at the roots of Marxian Critical Theory, the enlightenment philosophies of Kant and Hegel, together with an approach to empirical sociology informed by Freudian psychoanalysis and focused on mass psychology. For Horkheimer the traditional Marxist economics of Grünberg, Grossman and Wittfogel were no longer able to explain the shape the world was beginning to take.

The regression in political consciousness that had taken place, since the failure of the German revolution of 1918, culminated in the popularity and electoral success of the Nazi party. Horkheimer's pessimism, shared by younger members of the Institute such as Marcuse and Adorno, was a recognition of this fact. To some critics, the pessimistic turn towards theory that the Frankfurt School took in the 1930s represents a cowardly abandonment of revolutionary orthodoxy towards a safe liberalism; to most of its advocates as the fortunate correcting of the more "dogmatic" aspects of orthodoxy. And yet, seen in this historical context, it was neither. It was instead the result of an immeasurable political failure. Kant, Hegel, Durkheim, Freud—the enlightenment the Frankfurt School's brand of Marxism revisited, having once seemed a *fait accompli* to be safely filed away as a past victory, was now in danger of being negated, forgotten, neutralized. If Grünberg's brand of orthodoxy once dictated the obsolescence of this kind of enlightenment, the political events of 1933 had been such a giant step backwards that it was now forward thinking orthodoxy that had become unable to grasp the present.

This is what Adorno meant when he began his own retrospective summation, "Negative Dialectics" in 1966, with a melancholy inversion of Marx's dictum: "Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed." **IP**

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In 1939, as the war began, Benjamin was interned as an "enemy alien" by the French government. He managed to escape the internment camp, but after the German victory and occupation of France in 1940, he had to leave Paris for Marseille. In these dramatic circumstances, he wrote his last piece, the *Theses on the concept of history*, perhaps the most important document in revolutionary theory since Marx's celebrated "Theses on Feuerbach" (1845).

In these few but extraordinarily dense pages, the ideology of progress—also inside the Communist movement—is criticized in its philosophical foundations, the linear and empty time, with the help of a "theological" Messianic conception of time.

A few decades after Benjamin's death, the idea of a theology at the service of the poor in the struggle for their self-liberation, a theology intimately linked with Marxism, comes to life again, but this time in a very different

cultural and historical context: the liberationist Christianity of Latin America. But there is a secret affinity between Walter Benjamin and liberation theory...

In August 1940 Benjamin tried, with a group of German antifascist refugees, to cross the French border at the Pyrénées Mountains; they were arrested by the (Franco) Spanish police, taken to the village of Port-Bou, and told they would be delivered to the French and/or German police. Benjamin preferred to commit suicide. It was his last act of protest. **IP**

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the financial instability that plagued the 1930s than, as Dr. Speth asserts, an unfortunate corporate legal structure. From this perspective, the increasing influence of corporate actors in determining agricultural development, from genetically modified crops to monoculture, must ultimately be understood as a historic failure of an earlier reformism rather than a property inherent of corporations *per se*.

The solution to the food crisis of 1974 was to work towards an international agreement on agricultural trade. We are presently witnessing the failure of this solution, as international food prices again sore in 2008. High food prices were the genesis of the original reforms in 1846 and yet, after three major international food crises, reformist policies have only deepened the problem. The failure to arrive at an international agreement on agricultural trade at the World Trade Organisation's Doha round has set the stage for the latest reformist attempt to deal with the food crisis. Private capitals have seized on the failure of multilateral agricultural negotiations to establish their own international food standards. These standards have enabled the development of two internationally differentiated food streams: one stream for affluent consumers providing high quality food grown with environmentally sustainable

practices and fair-trade labor, while another stream supplies the remainder of humanity with the opposite.

Herein lays a deeper problem with reforming capitalism and one that drives at the heart of the paradox identified by Speth at the beginning of his interview: why in the face of a looming environmental crisis does a mass movement of "common concern" fail to act? The constant cycle of reformism and crisis suggests that an underlying dynamic is directing events rather than the actions of political movements. In the absence of an international politics of the Left, contemporary politics are unable to fully confront or resolve crises and are, thus, understandably disempowering. While the instruments of reform (e.g. cap and trade emission trading system, redesigning corporate legal structures) have the capacity to avert crisis, they focus on these "means" at the expense of seriously considering the "ends," or more specifically, the "reorganization of society around the central value of enhancing ecosystem integrity." Speth's "ends" are all mediated indirectly through capitalism. It is this indirect path, I believe, that has made environmental politics resemble more a "will-less football" than the necessary and engaged mass movement that it needs to be. **IP**

A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

This, our 5th issue, will be the last of the spring of 2008. New issues will resume in the fall. As we break for the summer we have a few brief comments and announcements. First off, we want to thank all of our contributors for the rich material they have provided us. We look forward to further submissions—which we strongly encourage and are always accepting—from these and more writers. We also want to encourage feedback from our readers; please note that a comments section accompanies each article on our website, www.platypus1917.org/theplatypusreview. Lastly, we would like to invite our readers to our first *Review* forum, projected for July, 2008. Please check with our website and watch for *PR* event posters for updates and announcements.

Requiem for the '60s

Response to a boycott of dis-cussion of "40 years of 1968"

The Platypus Historians Group

THE PLATYPUS AFFILIATED SOCIETY in Chicago, in coordination with several chapters of the new Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in Chicago [at the University of Chicago, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and Columbia College, Chicagol organized a public forum on "40 years of 1968: the problematic drama of the past in the present," scheduled for the evening of Thursday, May 8 downtown at the School of the Art Institute. Invited panelists included Bill Ayers and Mike Klonsky, of the historic SDS and its Revolutionary Youth Movement, and currently active in the Movement for a Democratic Society (MDS). But these two panelists withdrew and the forum was canceled, as we will explain.

The motivation for the forum was the need to work through the very mixed and confusing legacy of the 1960s New Left. For instance, the new SDS, founded in 2006, has found it difficult to discern whether it takes its inspiration from the historic SDS in its early instantiation in the optimism of participation in the Civil Rights Movement, *The Port Huron Statement*, ERAP [the Economic Research and Action Project, funded by the United Auto Workers], or whether it is fated to pick up precisely where the preceding SDS left off, with the frustration at the on-going Vietnam War and manifest futility of anti-war protests, the Days of Rage, the insularism of division and break up, and transformation of a key function of its leadership into the terrorist Weather Underground after 1968. 1968 seemed an important turning point. So a critical-retrospective appraisal of the trajectory of the 1960s by those who actually lived through it and still claimed its legacy seemed to be in order, and we looked forward to hearing what might be said.

The forum was prepared by a several-month long series of film screening-discussions hosted by SDS chapters and allies at various Chicago schools of *Columbia Revolt 1968*, *Finally Got the News* [1970, on the League of Revolutionary Black Workers/Detroit Revolutionary Union Movement], *Brother Outsider: the Bayard Rustin Story* [2003], *The Weather Underground* [2002], and *Rebels with a Cause* [2000, on the 1960s SDS], and readings and discussions of documents from the period collected in anthologies by Carl Oglesby [*The New Left Reader*, 1969], Massimo Teodori [*The New Left*, 1969] and Harold Jacobs [*Weatherman*, 1970], and contemporary histories by Irwin Unger [*The Movement*, 1974] and Kirkpatrick Sale [SDS, 1973].

But, at the last minute, several days before the forum, Mike Klonsky and Bill Ayers withdrew, causing the forum

to be canceled: Klonsky made a noisy e-mail protest; Ayers gave a polite excuse. Ayers is a current subject of controversy for the Obama Presidential campaign for his participation in Weather Underground terrorism; in the 1970s Klonsky was the leader of the communist movement in the U.S. officially recognized by the People's Republic of China.

The following is a response written by members of the Platypus Historians Group who helped prepare the forum. Appended below this response are the original forum description and questions for discussion circulated to the panelists.

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The youthful (then, pre-) Marxist German literary critic, historian and philosopher Walter Benjamin wrote at age 21 in 1913, during the *ennui* of the terminal crisis of modern European civilization, but just before the advent of its apocalypse in 1914, that "experience" is an ambiguous concept, especially from the standpoint of youth. As an admonition in the mouths of one's elders, "experience" means not merely a caution against the folly of youth, but the message that "it's all been tried already—and failed," which, to Benjamin's rebellious mind, poorly conceals the conclusion that "life is meaningless." Benjamin found this deference to past experience intolerable, and so should we.

The aggression of ancestors in frustration at their failures is found in their insistence that those who come after them live according to the supposed lessons of their experience. [For instance, we are supposed to learn that because they failed to overcome their own racism that we must accept as they did the late-1960s turn to Black Power separatist politics, and that, according to this enduring '60s-era sensibility, a critique of such politics must somehow mean opposition to black liberation.] But this then negates the very concept of "experience." It seems to maintain the meaningfulness of the past, but only at the expense of the present and future. Actually, it says for neither.

Benjamin wrote [after Baudelaire and Proust] that "what is passing takes on the character of an image." But an image cannot be disputed by rational argument but only obliterated—even if only under the dust of ages. The 1960s New Left insists on retaining its image-character, which might however indeed reveal that the politics of this period and its legacy belong definitively to the past. The enduring image of the '60s is a challenge to the present, to not remain spellbound by its power but to chart our own—new—experience for the present and future. For those of us who have been born only after 1968, this becomes not only an imperative but a simple necessity, for us to live through our own struggles and not relive those of our predecessors, however we might learn from them.

The present apparent inability to treat the 1960s as history finds its expression in various forms in this year marking 40 years of 1968, not least in the symbolism of the U.S. Presidential campaigns: McCain's candidacy offers the possibility of continuing the seemingly never-ending battle against the Nixon administration, Clinton offers the continued wisdom of post-'60s political cynicism with nostalgia for the 1990s when the 1960s generation found

prosperous maturity, and Obama is regarded uncomfortably with both hope and fear as the "inexperienced" "youthful" upstart who promises—symbolically—to put the '60s behind us, after two administrations of Boomers. But is it yet too early, or already too late for this requiem for the 1960s? For young people today the experience of the '60s is not only past but history.

There are two questions that remain for further consideration: Whether there are present and future social-political possibilities not circumscribed by the history and further trajectory of the thoughts and actions of the 1960s New Left; and whether it is possible to critique and overcome this history of our inherited present.

The answer that the '60s generation would seem to want to give us to both questions is: *No*. But perhaps this is because *they can't* abide that the real answer might be *Yes*.

The Platypus Affiliated Society and new Students for a Democratic Society present a public forum on:

40 years of 1968:

The problematic drama of the past in the present

Karl Marx wrote in 1852 that "the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living" [The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte], and complained of the rehearsal of past historical dramas in the politics of his day. Marx cited Hegel that "great world-historic facts and personages appear twice," but added "the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce."

More than 150 years after Marx the traditions of the world-historic moment of 1968 prove a problematic legacy. What is to be learned, both positively and negatively, from the 1960s New Left? How has the "New" Left grown old? And can it be redeemed? In what ways must we reconsider and depart from this legacy in order to have an effective Left for today and the future? How can we avoid becoming trapped in the ruins of the political movements that have preceded us?

Join us for a panel discussion and audience Q&A, with distinguished veterans of the 1960s New Left, as we reflect critically upon the social and political necessities of the present and the obstacles to an adequate emancipatory imagination expressed in the inappropriate masks worn of the '60s we continue to wear in contemporary politics.—What would it mean today, more than a generation after the 1960s, to start in the 21st Century what Marx demanded of the 19th Century, to take our poetry from the future?

Panelists:

Bill Ayers, former SDS, Revolutionary Youth Movement, Weather Underground
Chris Cutrone, Platypus
Atiya Khan, Platypus
Mike Klonsky, former SDS, Revolutionary Youth Movement, October League
Prexy Nesbitt, former Columbia University Student Afro-American Society during 1968 strike
[Moderator: James Vaughn, Platypus]

Questions for panelists:

For all of the following questions for which this is appropriate, please consider the question in two dimensions: [1] What did you think then [i.e., in 1968]; and [2] What do you think now?

1. What was the historical heritage of the preceding, "Old" Left [of the 1920s-30s]? Why was a "new" Left necessary in the 1960s? What inspired and informed this "new" Left?—What events, movements, thinkers?

2. Why did separatist politics [according to, e.g., race, gender, and sexuality, Black Power, feminism, gay liberation, etc.] become so salient by the late '60s? Why was it necessary, if so, to organize separately?—How did ideas of "self-determination" affect and inform politics in the 1960s?

Despite such separatism, how was the common "movement" understood? What, if anything, was the basis for the unity of the "movement"? [Why, do you think, did all these various diverse aspects of the movement emerge at roughly the same time, by the late '60s?]

3. Why was the labor movement seen more as part of the problem rather than as part of any potential solutions to social and political problems in the 1960s? [For example, the 1960s Students for a Democratic Society broke up in 1969 over attempts to create a "worker-student alliance," with those resisting this orientation striking off on the basis of the "revolutionary" character of "youth."]

How, if in any ways, was the labor movement part of the problem? What about the role of labor today? Do we need a "worker-student alliance" today? If so, why not then, or did it turn out to have been necessary, after all?

4. How was the U.S. role in the war in Vietnam understood in relation to other social and political issues?

What were the differences between the early and late '60s movement, e.g., from the Civil Rights Movement to the anti-war movement? What impacts did this shift of focus have on the possibilities for progressive politics?

5. It is said that those of you participating in the 1960s movements[is thought you could have changed the world. How was this change imagined? What kind of transformation would have been involved? What was thought to have been necessary and possible? How and why, do you think, did your attempts to change the world fail? Or did they succeed? How do we now stand as regards such demand for change? What lessons can be learned from this demand and its success or failure?

How, in your estimation, has the world changed since the 1960s? How does your sense of such change inform your thinking now, both retrospectively about what happened then, and about the world as it stands and what might be necessary to change it today? **IP**

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nature of the problem, and thus prevent the politics necessary to overcome it.

History and politics

Those thinkers and actors in a certain anticapitalist critical-theoretical and revolutionary political tradition, Marx, Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, Lukacs, Benjamin, Adorno et al., did not emerge out of a hyper-racialized social context like the U.S. The depth and meaning of anti-black racism in the U.S. is peculiar to its history; it is not a matter of ethnocentrism, national oppression, or any other form of cultural chauvinism, etc. Despite (or perhaps because) Marx did not share the concrete social context of such a racist society as the U.S., he recognized very clearly the stakes of the American Civil War against slavery that "Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded" [*Capital*, 1867], a formulation that remains unsurpassed. Black Americans are American, as American as any "white" American could possibly claim to be. At the same time, the history of anti-black racist oppression is inseparable from the development of capitalism. And, historically, socialism has been the most consistently anti-racist form of politics.

It was not any supposed lack of awareness or insensitivity to the issue of racism that caused black radicals of the "Old" Left in the 1920s-30s such as Claude McKay and Paul Robeson, inspired to Communist politics by the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, to have failed to articulate a "black" power ethics or practical political principle, but because this would have cut against the grain of their actual progressive-emancipatory politics. These figures were not lacking in black "pride" or political militancy, but they were part of the truly heroic (and truly tragic) history of radicalism of the early 20th Century that now lies obscured behind the more recent history of the 1960s and the aftermath of its failures (which were more farcical than tragic). As Davis pointed out in her Jan. 24 lecture I reviewed, the real historical background and basis for the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s-60s was the earlier "cross-racial" organizing of workers, in the South—where it meant risking one's life, white or black—as well as in the North, in the 1920s-30s, when it was actually much more difficult to do this than it would have been in the 1960s, but which the "Left" of the '60s failed to even try to do, rationalizing their failure with separatist Black Power ideology.

The late-'60s Black Power turn was the result of the failures and frustrations of the limitations of the liberal integrationist politics of Martin Luther King, Jr., A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, et al. But this was not because King et al. were somehow lacking in "black" consciousness—as was scurrilously implied by Malcolm X with his famous "house nigger"—"field nigger" rhetoric—but because the practical politics of liberal-reformist integrationism could not address adequately the issue of capitalism, though King et al. were concerned with labor issues [the 1963 March on Washington was "for jobs and freedom"]. Coming as we do today after the manifest inadequacies and failures of the policy reforms of the Civil Rights era, we can fall victim to naturalizing the logic of the Black Power turn of the late '60s and think of it and

the attitudes we inherit from it as some kind of necessary stage. But this would be a mistake, and not only because the Black Power turn was not a turn to the Left, but rather to the Right—the Black Power turn was a conservative recoil, an adaptation to defeat and dashed expectations, a lowering of horizons that involved the unwarranted assumption of the intractability of white racism—a sin much worse on the part of the "white" radicals who embraced this perspective than perhaps for the black radicals who articulated it.

More importantly, we can and must say today, more than 40 years later, that post-Black Power politics has obviously failed—and much more miserably than the Civil Rights Movement—to improve the social conditions for black people in the U.S.—as Adolph Reed, who I cited in my review of Davis, for one, has written about extensively, for instance in "Black Particularity Reconsidered" [AKA "The 'Black Revolution' and the Reconstitution of Domination," 1979/86], pointing out the highly detrimental effects of "posing as politics."—But whereas earlier black radicals of the 1920s-30s moved on from the charitylanity of Marcus Garvey et al. to the liberal, radical and socialist politics of W. E. B. Du Bois et al., the "politics" informed by the '60s-'70s "New Left" regressed backwards along the same path, to Ron Karenga inventing holidays like Kwanzaa, etc., by the 1980s even rehabilitating Booker T. Washington's avowedly conservative notions of "self-help" and waxing nostalgic for the "black community" of the segregated conditions of the Jim Crow era (see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., et al.), and affirming "black culture" as already constituting a valid political realm of "everyday acts of resistance" [see Robin D. G. Kelley et al.]—all the results of political failures on the "Left." As Bayard Rustin pointed out at the advent of the Black Power turn, "Passionate self-assertion can be a mask for accommodation" [quoted in John D'Emilio, "Lost Prophet: the life and times of Bayard Rustin", Free Press, 2003, p. 475].

So this is not a matter of whether one chooses to prioritize "race" over "class," etc., but rather how one understands the problem of racism and how capitalism is understood as a context within which changes in social problems like racism (becoming better or worse) take place. Capitalism is a global social system that determines the value and employment of human activity (or "labor") and its reproduction in ways over which people have remained relatively powerless as individual and social agents. Capitalism is the reason why there is such a thing as "disposable" labor, why human beings as potential laborers are subject to being "disposed of," and all the social consequences of this. So *both* social categories of "race" and socioeconomic "class" find their conditions of greater social context in the dynamics and historical changes of capital. [This is also true of issues of gender and sexuality. See the potentially seminal but largely neglected essays by Juliet Mitchell, "Women: the Longest Revolution," 1966; and John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," 1973.] Not simply "race" and "class," but *racism* and *capitalism* and how they are related need to be addressed by any purportedly social emancipatory politics. The ways the "Left" has tried—or failed to try, and found excuse from

trying—to address the problems of racism [as one would need to do in organizing the working class] since the 1960s have been worse than inadequate, and have turned into ideological distractions and political dead ends, bogged down in a host of pseudo-problems [that, for instance, Barack Obama was able to identify in his speech—against the desperate last gasp of racist politics by the Clintons et al.], whereas, according to Rustin's critique of the Black Power turn, "the real cause of racial injustice . . . is not bad attitudes but bad social conditions" ["The Failure of Black Separatism," *Harper's Magazine*, January, 1970]. Without a practical political focus on capitalism, the social conditions for racism will remain unaddressed, and racism and the problems affecting black people and others can continue.

Ideology

"Race" is a pseudo-biological category that deserves to be placed in quotation marks because it is not "real," it is not to be naturalized and taken for granted as a point of departure, but rather needs to be attacked as the very thing to be overcome. An anti-racist politics, a politics opposed to any form of racism, cannot just assume "race" from the start without becoming confused and confounded. Black "racial" identity is a negative not a positive value and cannot be rehabilitated or inverted for it has only ever meant degradation. We ought not to forget that anti-black racist sentiment—the disqualification of individuals rationalized by reference to their blackness—is just as prevalent among blacks as among whites and other groups in the U.S.

As Frantz Fanon put it very succinctly over 50 years ago, in "Black Skin, White Masks" (1952), "What is often called the black soul is a white man's artifact," "For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white," and "The Negro is not. Any more than the white man." We ought not to forget this.

Because we all